

# Who was St. Patrick anyway?

Not much is known about the real St. Patrick, the man whose life — which ended on March 17, about 460 A.D. — we celebrate with parties and all things green. We *do* know that he didn't chase the snakes out of Ireland as myth would have it.

It's not even certain where in the British Isles Patrick was born, but it wasn't in Ireland — possibly southern Scotland. When he was in his teens he was captured in a raid, taken to Ireland against his will and enslaved by a warlord who forced him to work as a shepherd. He escaped six years later and made his way out of Ireland, to return some years later.

After studying to become a priest, Patrick made his way back to the land of his captivity. He was determined to convert the barbarians who were still practicing human sacrifice, carrying on a lucrative slave trade and constantly waging war.

Had Patrick never been kidnapped, the barbarism may have gone on for centuries. But, by the time of his death, slave trading and human sacrifice had nearly ceased, and the internal warfare had become more limited and "civilized." In addition, when the Roman Empire collapsed and European literacy was lost to the Dark Ages, it survived only in the Irish monasteries founded by Patrick and his successors.

Patrick's own captivity left him with a strong hatred of slavery. He may have been the first religious leader anywhere to speak out strongly against it at a time when even the Roman papacy condoned it.

March being Women's History Month, it's also worth noting that St. Patrick supported women when most men regarded them as property. In his writings, he praised the strength and courage of Irish women and deplored the suffering of women in slavery. In addition to being renowned as the patron saint of the country he evangelized, Patrick is known as a protector of the downtrodden.

So we all have reason to celebrate St. Patrick's life. Whether we're European American, Asian American, African American or not even sure of our origins, we're all Americans — but, just for today, we're all Irish.

